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AUTHOR	Shastri, Anuradhaa
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of service learning on preservice teachers, integrating service learning into an undergraduate Educational Psychology course. The study focused on the impact of service learning in the areas of preservice teachers' personal, professional, academic, and career functioning. The student teachers were placed at a local elementary school that had a high poverty index. Participants were required to engage in service learning for a minimum of 20 hours in activities such as assisting the classroom teacher with organizing and conducting classroom activities, going on field trips, tutoring, and serving as reading buddies. They were also required to turn in a triple-entry journal, a reflective paper, and written free responses. Analysis of the ungraded written free responses indicated that student teachers enjoyed the project and learned strategies for tutoring. They appreciated the opportunity to watch, listen, and learn, and they had their eyes opened to the experiences of impoverished students. Students felt that the service learning reinforced their desire to teach. (SM)

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Preservice Teachers' Responses to a Service – Learning Experience

By

Anuradhaa Shastri, Ph. D.
State University of New York, College at Oneonta

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All correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to the Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, College at Oneonta, State University of New York, Oneonta, New York 13820-4015
Email: shastra@oneonta.edu

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Abstract

Progressive teacher education programs face a pair of daunting yet crucial tasks. New teachers must be prepared to function effectively in schools as they exist today. They also must be educated to take a leadership role in the improvement and restructuring of P-12 education to meet students' and society's needs more fully. Service-learning appears to have considerable potential as a method to achieve both of these goals. Properly designed service learning courses relate the community service experience to the course material and require that students reflect on their experiences through writings, discussions, or class presentations. Service-learning is proliferating in preservice teacher education programs throughout the country. This expansion, however, is somewhat paradoxical because educators and administrators have invested time and resources developing service-learning courses and campus infrastructure when there is paucity of research evidence documenting the effectiveness of service-learning in reaching educational objectives of the course. The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of service-learning by integrating service-learning in an undergraduate Educational Psychology course. This impact was examined in terms of four areas of functioning among preservice teachers, namely personal, professional, academic, and career. Findings are interpreted and implications for further research are discussed.

Introduction

Progressive teacher education programs face a pair of daunting yet crucial tasks. New teachers must be prepared to function effectively in schools as they exist today. They also must be educated to take a leadership role in the improvement and restructuring of P-12 education to meet students' and society's needs more fully. Service-learning appears to have considerable potential as a method to achieve both of these goals (Anderson, 2000). Academic service-learning is a pedagogical model that intentionally integrates academic learning and relevant community service (Howard, 1998). Properly designed service learning courses relate the community service experience to the course material and require that students reflect on their experiences through writings, discussions, or class presentations (Sax and Astin, 1997).

Theoretical Framework

Service-learning is proliferating in preservice teacher education programs throughout the country. A 1998 survey conducted by the National Service-Learning in Teacher Education Partnership found that more than 225 of the approximately 1,325 teacher education programs in the nation offer service-learning experiences. Another 200 were interested in developing such opportunities for progressive teachers.

This expansion, however, is somewhat paradoxical because educators and administrators have invested time and resources developing service-learning courses and campus infrastructure when there is paucity of research evidence documenting the effectiveness of service-learning in reaching educational objectives of the course, the curriculum, and the institutional mission. The increase in the number of service-learning courses without supporting evidence is all the more remarkable because it has occurred

during a decade that has witnessed increased emphasis on the assessment and accountability in higher education (Bringle and Hatcher, 2000).

The acute need for research on service-learning has not gone unnoticed. Wingspread conferences were conducted in 1991 and 1993 to develop a research agenda for service-learning. More recently, Giles and Eyler (1998), the Research Advisory Council convened by Campus Compact during 1997-1998, and the Campus Compact Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education have reiterated this need for research and provided a set of issues, topics, and questions for research. One of the questions that has been raised is - what are the central learning outcomes we expect service-learning to yield? This has been termed as the Learning Question (Kezar and Rhoads, 2001) and relates to debates over the diverse set of learning outcomes. These include the debate between affective versus cognitive conceptions of student learning as well as discussions of experiential versus abstract academic work. However, these debates continue to conflict with holistic theories of how students learn and develop, and with the growing body of research on this topic, namely student learning (Terenzini, Pascarella, and Bliming, 1996). Service learning promotes a seamless view of learning in that it requires educators to link classroom learning with out-of-class experiences.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of service-learning by integrating service-learning in an undergraduate Educational Psychology course. This impact was examined in terms of four areas of functioning among preservice teachers, namely personal, professional, academic, and career.

Method

Participants

Thirty-two pre-service teachers predominantly sophomores and juniors, enrolled in "Psychological Foundations of Education" , were placed in a local elementary school. Most participants came from middle-class backgrounds.

Setting

The elementary school has a student population with a 55% poverty index. Other critical features are the location of the school in an area with approximately twelve neighborhood bars with daytime hours, four trailer parks, two subsidized housing projects, and a park and viaducts to an interstate highway which are frequent hangouts for teens and runaway and homeless youths.

Tasks

The participants were required to engage in service for a minimum of twenty hours in activities as assisting the classroom teacher in organizing and conducting classroom activities, field trips, tutoring, and serving as reading buddies. Additionally, they were required to turn in a triple-entry journal and a reflective paper that were graded, and written free responses that were not graded.

Data

The ungraded written free responses were used for this study as they were regarded as relatively unbiased responses.

Results

Responses were qualitatively analyzed in relation to personal, professional, academic, and career functioning. These categories are inter-related and should not be regarded as being mutually exclusive. Following are a few examples of responses in each category.

Personal Functioning

"To be completely honest, when I was first assigned this project I was annoyed. "Oh great, more work", I thought. However, once I arrived in the classroom and saw the faces of 22 first graders, I was overwhelmed. The kids were excited to have me there . . .this project has instilled in me even more that Teaching is my dream . . . Thank you for making it a mandatory project – I am proud to say that at the age of 21 I know what I want "to be". This is an experience I will never forget."

Professional Functioning

"I tutored two children in reading skills. This experience with below average readers was helpful to me. I learned to recognize and praise strengths and progress. I learned tips and strategies to help even average readers with difficulties that they might be having."

Academic Functioning

"I appreciated the opportunity to watch, listen, and learn. I felt it helped my own metacognitive views and insights toward teaching and the text. It has boosted my interest and desire to do other projects and assignments . . ."

"The teachers were excellent and provided me with examples of discovery learning, cooperative learning, and other creative teaching methods"

"This project has had a positive impact on me. I was never before able to see the different ability levels. It made me sad to see that one kid who was always so far behind everyone else, who couldn't sit with the rest of the class when they were doing group reading. That child had to spend that time doing the work that he did not finish. It also made me realize how less fortunate people really are. I was able to see the way the children came dressed and the way they were dirty. Some of the children told me about their family lives. Some were going through divorces or have already, one child lived with his grandfather. I guess I was too naïve to notice all of this when and where I grew up."

Career Functioning

"My experience with my teacher was great. I really enjoyed helping the children with their math or reading assignments. I felt like I really helped some of those children. Out of the time that I was there it showed me even more that I wanted to teach."

Significance

Service learning is a pedagogical model; it is first and foremost a teaching methodology, more than a values model or a leadership development model or a social responsibility model (Howard, 1998). Integrating service-learning into preservice teacher education programs takes considerable time and effort. But the investment pays off in terms of benefits to the community, P-12 students' academic and personal growth, and preservice teachers' growth as educators (Anderson, 2000).

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